

take control of stress now

John P. Reeves

The buzz word of the seventies was "stress."

Until 1936, when Hans Selye first coined the word and began his research into what it was and how it affected people, the phenomenon was a mystery. But that's all changed.

Today, school children can describe the biology and physiology of stress. The sheer volume of material written about stress is increasing geometrically, and dozens of books from Selye's own *Stress Without Distress* to Norfolk's *The Stress Factor* diagram it, map it, and explore both its geography and genealogy. Practitioners conduct stress workshops and professionals of all sorts scramble to get on the bandwagon.

Control implies that there are things you can change, and things that can't be changed. The trick is to know the difference. Switching gears now and learning to take control of stress begins with . . . identifying pressures.

Defined, stress is simply an internal reaction to external pressure. Pressure is applied from without and stress results from within. Some of the reaction is involuntary—purely chemical/biological. A carry-over, many feel, from ancient days when man, faced with the constant choice of having to take "flight" from external dangers or stand his ground and "fight," prepared for battle.

Nowadays, the battles are different, but the reaction remains. Just about any kind of emotional upheaval can trigger the stress response and the biochemical reactions that go with it. The stress response is, in effect, a magnificent warning system that serves to make us aware of situations that threaten our happiness, our self-esteem, health, and mental equilibrium.

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But, warning systems can go haywire. Like the smoke detector that sounds off any time somebody walks near it. If one's stress response is constantly going off at inappropriate times, it becomes damaging and unpleasant. Downright excessive. At such times, when it's inappropriately triggered, stress is referred to as "distress."

So, amidst the furor about what stress is, it occurs to me that the real issue, the nuts and bolts in this whole study of stress, has to do *NOT* so much with stress itself, but with the *CONTROL* of stress. If you're going to deal effectively with this 20th century disease (as one author puts it), the emphasis must be on control. Not just coincidentally, it appears that the difference between the individual who is at the mercy of life's pressures and the person who "has his act together" is one of being in charge.

Over the years, researchers have learned that most stress is self-induced, although not deliberately so. The startling discovery is that, to a marked degree, *the stress reaction can be controlled*. In the final analysis, the critical dimension to consider is "to control or be controlled" by stress.

Taking Control

The thrust of this article, then, has to do with consciously, deliberately taking control of stress . . . and doing it now!

An idealistic dream? Not so.

Taking control can become a definite, concrete reality—provided you keep three things in mind: (1) you realize that control is possible, (2) you realize that *NOW* is the only time you can take control, and (3) you recognize that to take control of the way you respond to pressures is to decide which ones are worth reacting to and which ones you won't allow to "press your button." That's the secret. And, we want to show you two things:

1. How to take control, *NOW*!
2. How to be selective about which pressures you permit yourself to react to.

The notion of control is heavy stuff. There are millions of people who are absolutely convinced that they have little, if any, control of their lives. The conviction doesn't always exist at the conscious level though. Rather, it may lie buried somewhere in the subconscious mind, oozing out and influencing almost everything people do. Yet, being in control is within the grasp of practically everybody. And what it can do for the self-image! As you take control, gain command, your view of yourself is almost sure to improve. As your

self-esteem improves, energies are released that can contribute to your ability to become fully effective.

Missildine, author of *Your Inner Conflicts and How To Solve Them*, suggests the following exercise, which not only shows you that control is possible, but also begins to allow you to take control. Try it out.

1. In the space below, write down something that you've been putting off, that you'll do before this day ends. (Read the newspaper, telephone a colleague or friend, file an article, write a letter. Something simple.)
2. In the space below, write the name of somebody close to you, and some specific thing you'll do for that person before the day ends.
3. In the space below, write down something special that you'll do for yourself before today ends.

If you repeat the above process each day, you'll soon discover taking control can be much easier than you imagined. More importantly taking control doesn't require any 180-degree changes in your life. As a matter of fact, the most significant changes come in small incremental ways—spaced over time. The point, of course, is that *control is possible . . .* and within our reach.

Controlling Stress Reactions

Control implies that there are things you can change, and things that can't be changed. The trick is to know the difference. Switching gears now and learning to take control of stress begins with the following exercise in identifying pressures.

1. Identify and make a list of the pressures that produce a stress response in you. (Don't look for the standard list of "stressors" in this article because what causes stress in you might send someone else into deliriums of delight. What rings your chimes may sound somebody else's death knell.)
2. After you've identified and listed the pressures that cause a stress response in you, identify the things you do that produce stress reactions in others. (Do you slurp

your soup, set impossible deadlines, demand perfection in mere mortals, dawdle in your job until your supervisor crawls up the wall?)

3. Consider the following questions: Which of those things you're able to change or which, in time, may be up for change. (For instance, perhaps you're constantly beating subordinates over the head with "yesterdeadlines"— "I want that done yesterday."

You may be able to reduce a lot of pressure caused by your behavior with some planning. Or, suppose your boss is always hitting you with last-minute deadlines. You may be able to make allowances for his/her behavior by planning your work schedule a little "thin," thus allowing time for those last-minute assignments. The idea is to spot the pressure points that produce stress and develop your own methods for reducing or eliminating the stress reaction. Pre-planning reactions (or lack of reactions) before they occur is one way of helping to deter inappropriate stress reactions to pressure. It's like defensive driving. The bottom line is that you're prepared in advance for almost any emergency.

The entire process for taking control of stress NOW can be summarized in the Serenity Prayer:

"God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
Courage to change the things I can
And wisdom to know the difference."
And, do it now!